

Small Fire, Big Forest (Thoughtful Witness)

Matt Summers · What Is a Follower Of the Way? · James 3:1-12; James 3:13-16; James 3:17-18

AT A GLANCE

Matt Summers reads James 3 as an argument that words are disproportionate — a small tongue, like a small fire, shapes atmospheres far beyond the moment they were spoken. Because no one can fully tame the tongue by sheer discipline, what's needed isn't a better technique but wisdom from above, forming the root that produces the fruit of our speech.

- Words act like fire and drugs—tiny in the moment, disproportionate in effect—so wisdom judges speech by impact, not size.
- Harsh words usually expose long-accumulated resentment or insecurity rather than creating it; the root needs attention, not just the mouth.
- Because no one can fully tame the tongue, thoughtful witness comes from receiving wisdom from above, not perfecting self-discipline alone.

“Our words do not simply leave our mouths. They create environments that other people have to live in.”

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

[James 3:1-12](#) — My brothers and sisters, not many of you should be teachers. I say this because, as you know, we who teach will be judged more strictly than others. We all make many mistakes. A person who never said anything wrong would be perfect. Someone like that would be able to control their whole body too. We put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us. With these bits we can control their whole body. It is the same with ships. A ship is very big, and it is pushed by strong winds. But a very small rudder controls that big ship. And the one who controls the rudder decides where the ship will go. It goes where he wants it to go. It is the same with our tongue. It is a small part of the body, but it can boast about doing great things. A big forest fire can be started with only a little flame. The tongue is like a fire. It is a world of evil among the parts of our body. It spreads its evil through our whole body and starts a fire that influences all of life. It gets this fire from hell. Humans have control over every kind of wild animal, bird, reptile, and fish, and they

have controlled all these things. But no one can control the tongue. It is wild and evil, full of deadly poison. We use our tongues to praise our Lord and Father, but then we curse people who were created in God's likeness. These praises and curses come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, this should not happen. Do good water and bad water flow from the same spring? Of course not. My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree make olives? Or can a grapevine make figs? No, and a well full of salty water cannot give good water. (ERV)

James 3:13-16 — Are there any among you who are really wise and understanding? Then you should show your wisdom by living right. You should do what is good with humility. A wise person does not boast. If you are selfish and have bitter jealousy in your hearts, you have no reason to boast. Your boasting is a lie that hides the truth. That kind of "wisdom" does not come from God. That "wisdom" comes from the world. It is not spiritual. It is from the devil. Where there is jealousy and selfishness, there will be confusion and every kind of evil. (ERV)

James 3:17-18 — But the wisdom that comes from God is like this: First, it is pure. It is also peaceful, gentle, and easy to please. This wisdom is always ready to help people who have trouble and to do good for others. This wisdom is always fair and honest. People who work for peace in a peaceful way get the blessings that come from right living. (ERV)

The argument

The Tongue's Disproportion — A small member, a wildfire effect

Matt Summers opens James 3:1-7, noting that James includes himself in 'we all stumble in many ways' rather than separating the reckless from the careful, and reframes 'perfect' not as flawless but as complete — govern the tongue and you'd govern nearly everything else. James gives three images: a bit, a rudder, a fire. Summers lingers on the fire because it outlasts the others: 'a bit directs and a rudder steers, but a fire spreads and it moves recklessly beyond the places where it started.' The point isn't that words are dangerous occasionally, but that something almost weightless in the moment can determine what follows for years.

Insight — A moment's speech can outweigh its own size, so wisdom evaluates words by their effect, not their duration.

Words Create Atmosphere — Speech outlives the moment it was spoken in

Drawing on the 2020 wildfire smoke that darkened the Bay Area sky though the fires burned miles away, Summers argues that words don't simply leave us — they 'create environments that other people have to live in.' He names why speakers underestimate this: 'when I'm the one who said something I only remember how brief the moment was. The person on the other side remembers what changed after it.' His answer isn't paralysis over every sentence but curiosity — noticing whether people around us grow more honest or more guarded — and treating a recurring defensive pattern as information about ourselves rather than grounds for self-defense.

Insight — Since words shape the emotional climate others must inhabit, wisdom asks what effect our speech produces, not merely what we intended by it.

The Tongue Exposes the Root — Sharp words are usually symptoms, not sources

Turning to James 3:7-12, Summers notices James shift from managing speech to questioning its source: fresh and salt water can't come from one spring, a fig tree can't bear olives. Using his own moving-day 'junk drawer' — the place things go because 'we don't know where else to put them' — he argues harsh words often don't create resentment but expose it: 'the argument did not necessarily create the resentment... it simply opened the drawer.' 'No human being can tame the tongue' isn't despair for Summers but relief from the illusion that self-control alone completes us; formation, he says, 'was never supposed to be a renovation project that we complete on our own.'

Insight — Sharp words are usually symptoms, so the honest question after speaking is not how to phrase it better but what it reveals needs addressing at the root.

Two Wisdoms, One Choice — Conviction without contempt, courage without selfish ambition

In James 3:13-18, Summers contrasts wisdom 'from above' with the earthly, unspiritual, demonic wisdom marked by 'bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.' True wisdom is proven 'by his good conduct' and 'the meekness of wisdom,' a posture that 'does not need to dominate somebody else in order to prove that it's right.' He illustrates the false choice between a street preacher, all conviction and no care for how truth lands, and a scholar so careful he never says what he believes — rejecting both for 'conviction without contempt, courage without selfish ambition.' The chapter closes not with sparks but with sowing, since real change, unlike damage, arrives slowly.

Insight — Wisdom is proven less by correctness than by conduct, so a thoughtful witness holds conviction and gentleness together rather than trading one for the other.

DEVOTIONAL

There is a drawer in every house, and there is a drawer in every heart — the place where the things we didn't know what to do with have quietly gathered while we were busy living. We forget it's there until something forces us to open it, and then we're surprised, almost offended, that it was ever so full. A sharp word said in traffic, a comment made in a meeting, a sentence flung at someone we love — we call it a slip, but it was rarely a slip. It was a spring finally showing what kind of water had been collecting underground the whole time. And there is a fire in every forest before there is a forest fire — a spark small enough to step on, left alone until it wasn't. We tell ourselves our words are small because the moment they take is small: a few seconds of air, hardly noticed by us. But the person who received them does not measure

by seconds. They measure by what changed afterward, by the air they now have to breathe. James does not leave us here to catalogue our failures. He tells us plainly that we cannot tame this thing by will alone, and somehow that is mercy, not sentence — because it means the answer was never going to be found in trying harder to hold our tongues. It was always going to be found in becoming, at the root, people who no longer need the fire. Wisdom from above does not arrive like a spark. It arrives like a harvest — slow, sown, and trusted to grow.

Reflection

- Where in your life have your words recently exposed something already accumulating beneath the surface — resentment, insecurity, ambition — rather than caused it?
- Think of someone whose words to you became an atmosphere you had to live in for a long time. What did that teach you about the weight your own words carry?
- What would it look like this week to be curious about the effect of your speech on someone close to you, rather than defensive about your intent?

Closing prayer

God, thank you for the power of our words and for the reminder of what wisdom is. For all of us struggling with this, help us take time this week to evaluate what we're rooted in — what we're saying, what we're thinking — and let that inform us, invite wisdom into our lives, and make us better witnesses. Give us the wisdom to notice where we've overlooked signs of what's beneath our own words, so we can become partners in the good, healthy work of thoughtful witness to those around us. In Jesus' name, amen.

FORMATION

One thing to remember

Your words don't just leave your mouth — they create an atmosphere someone else has to live in, so wisdom asks what that atmosphere is.

This week

Each evening this week, before God rather than only yourself, ask: 'What atmosphere did my words create today — peace or disorder, honesty or defensiveness?' Bring whatever surfaces to him in prayer, and ask him to grow in you the wisdom James describes as pure, peaceable, and full of mercy.

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